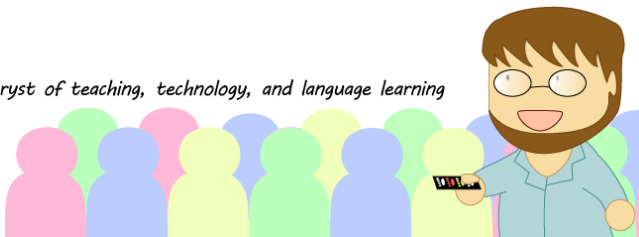




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A tryst of teaching, technology, and language learning



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Authentic writing practice through social media and news websites

(<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/2013/10/authentic-writing-practice-through-social-media-and-news-websites/>)

websites/)

I'm giving a workshop at Three Rivers TESOL (<http://3riversotesol.org/conf/fall13/index.html>) on how we can use social news and media websites to help ESL students practice written English. It's an especially exciting method of writing practice because it enables students to interact with native speakers through text. Of course, ESL students often get to interact with native speakers verbally, but opportunities for authentic written communication are more limited!

See my tips below for how teachers can take advantage of Twitter, Reddit, and TED.com to engage students in authentic writing practice.



(<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/twitter-logo.png>)

Twitter

1. For all students: Sentence practice.

Twitter is excellent for helping students practice specific vocabulary and grammatical constructions. Messages are limited to 140 characters, so they're the perfect length for writing a few clauses.

Twitter also acts as an archive which allows students to look back and see the progress they've made over time.

Some specific tips:

- **Establish a hashtag for your class.** (For example, Corey Earle's course (<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/2013/07/teaching-with-twitter/>) used #amst2001.) Hashtags act sort of like folders for tweets. When you search for your class's hashtag, you will see every recent class-related tweet from each of your students, making it simple to compile and check your students' work.
- **Consider giving corrective feedback directly through Twitter.** Simply reply to the tweet with your feedback. That way, your feedback is always connected to the student's original tweet.
- **Encourage students to engage and interact with one another.** Students can respond to one another's tweets or build up products collaboratively. For example, students might be assigned to write a story together on Twitter, with each student taking a turn to write snippets of the story one sentence at a time.

2. For all students: Hold a weekly Twitter chat for your entire program or department.

Hold a weekly Twitter chat (<http://janetfouts.com/how-to-participate-in-a-tweet-chat/>) for your entire program or department. Think of it as a virtual "language house" environment: everyone gathers together for 30 minutes to chat in the target language. To better direct and encourage discussion, have a different discussion theme for each week (families, hobbies, etc.) and ask a new discussion question every five to ten minutes.

3. For intermediate and advanced students: Participate in the larger Twitter

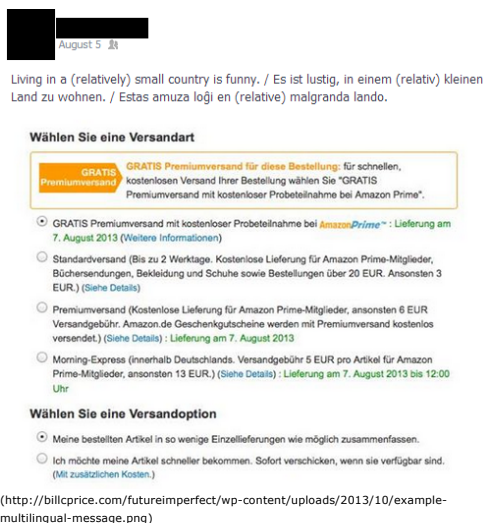
community.

Unlike Facebook, which focuses primarily on family and real-life acquaintances, Twitter is a very "open" network which encourages its users to connect and interact with strangers. This makes it very well-suited as a starting point for English language learners to find native speakers of English who have similar

interests. In addition, because messages on Twitter have a limit of 140 characters, they must be kept very short and simple. ELLs may find Twitter less intimidating than some of the alternatives.

4. Encourage students to post bilingually on Twitter and other social networks they use.

As a purely extracurricular exercise, students should try to translate their own native-language social media messages into English. Below are two examples of colleagues of mine posting multilingual messages:



- An American living in Germany and posting the same message simultaneously in English, German, and Esperanto.



- An Icelandic person in America posting the same message simultaneously in Icelandic and English.



(<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/reddit-logo.png>)

Reddit.com (<http://www.reddit.com/>)

Reddit is a social news site which enables users to submit websites and news stories to *subreddits*, which are discussion forums for specific topics. For example, the */r/science* (<http://www.reddit.com/r/science>) subreddit is for sharing and discussing science news and the */r/Pittsburgh* (<http://www.reddit.com/r/pittsburgh>) subreddit is for sharing and discussing Pittsburgh news. (Subreddits also exist for teachers' collaboration and

professional development, including [/r/education](http://www.reddit.com/r/education) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/education>) , [/r/teaching](http://www.reddit.com/r/teaching) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/teaching>) , [/r/Teachers](http://www.reddit.com/r/Teachers) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/Teachers>) , [/r/TEFL](http://www.reddit.com/r/TEFL) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/TEFL>) , and [/r/EdTech](http://www.reddit.com/r/EdTech) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/EdTech>) !)

Every news website has its own commenting system. The advantage of Reddit is that it aggregates all of those news articles into one place and thus provides a single, unified, third-party forum in which to leave comments and have discussions. In the context of an English language class, this means that all of a students' writing is centralized on Reddit, rather than being scattered across the internet on several different websites.

The first step

Reddit is only useful in an educational setting if you can keep track of your students. I suggest that you create a systematic, anonymous formula for student usernames and then stick to it. For example, the first student on my roster in a course titled Writing 5S in school term 2141 might be assigned the Reddit username W5S214101. The teachers of [/r/EFLcomics](http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics) (see below) assign their students similarly-anonymous usernames like "11RB048" (<http://www.reddit.com/user/11RB048>) . Whether you take the time to create these accounts yourself is up to you. It might be better to simply hand out the name assignments to students on slips of paper and then let them create the accounts and passwords on the website themselves.

1. For beginners and intermediate students: EFL Comics

I've written previously about EFL Comics (<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/2013/07/efl-comics-does-grammar-make-you-mad-try-raging-instead/>) . In short, students use an online tool to create short comic strips, then submit them to a community of English language teachers and English learners at the [/r/EFLcomics](http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics) subreddit. Feedback is provided communally in the comments section.

A bit of administrative impedimenta: Before doing this activity, you must create Reddit accounts for each of your students and then submit the list of usernames to the moderators of the [/r/EFLcomics](http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics) community. According to the sidebar of the community, "[o]nly approved users can post to EFLcomics. If you want to post a comic, get in touch with the moderators." (<http://www.reddit.com/message/compose?to=%2Fr%2FEFLcomics>) " As such, the overall setup time and lead time can be considerable.

Once you've cleared those hurdles, here are the steps to successfully leading students through this activity:

1. **Introduce** students to a comic creation tool such as Dan's Awesome Rage Maker (<http://ragemaker.net/>) , LOL Builder (<http://builder.cheezburger.com/builder/rage>) , or Rage Generator (<http://ragegenerator.com/generator>) . (Warning: every one of these comic creation sites contains some PG-13 material, including occasional bits of strong language. For example, one stick figure is captioned "F*** YEA.")
2. Students **create a comic strip** incorporating target vocabulary or grammar.
3. Students **save their comic strips** to their computers.
4. Students **upload the comics** to a free image host (imgur.com (<http://imgur.com/>) is the best) and **submit them** to [/r/EFLcomics](http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics>) on Reddit. (On Dan's Awesome Rage Maker, this can be done very easily: the "save comic" menu has an option to submit the comic directly to [/r/EFLcomics](http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics).)

2. For intermediate and advanced students: Read articles and write responses

In this activity, students read an article on the Reddit website and then write a comment for other users to read and respond to. The goal of this activity is to practice authentic reading and writing while opening the door to interaction and discussion with native speakers. This activity can be conducted in either a controlled or very open-ended manner.

Strictly controlled activity:

1. The teacher finds a good, level-appropriate article in a subreddit related to the topic of the current class unit. For example, for a unit related to the environment, the [/r/environment](http://www.reddit.com/r/environment) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/environment>) subreddit is a good place to start. Consider pasting the article into the BNC-COCA-25 text profiler (<http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/bnc/>) to analyze its vocabulary content and help you develop supplemental materials for scaffolding and assessment. (<http://www.reddit.com/r/environment>)
2. Students read the article printed out on paper as a normal in-class reading activity, including scaffolding, comprehension questions, discussion questions, and so on.
3. For homework, students visit the article on Reddit and type out their answer for one of the discussion questions. Students include any target vocabulary or grammar assigned by the teacher.

Moderately controlled activity:

1. The teacher **selects a subreddit**—either a general one like [/r/worldnews](http://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews) (<http://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews>) or a specific one related to the topic of the current class unit.
2. Whether in a lab class or for homework, individual students select articles to read from within that subreddit. Consider having a minimum length requirement.
3. Each student types a response to their selected article, including any target vocabulary or grammar points assigned by the teacher.

I did this version of the activity several times with a student I tutored over the summer. I let him select articles from the [/r/worldnews](http://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews) subreddit. Here is an example of his work:

Spanish train driver charged with 79 counts of homicide (reuters.com)

2814 submitted 2 months ago by tepidwaters

1323 comments source share save hide report hide all child comments buffer

sorted by: top

navigate by: submitter | moderator | friend | me | admin | IAmA | images | popular | new

you are viewing a single comment's thread.
view the rest of the comments →

1 point 2 months ago (10)

The media says that the accident is only because of the conductor, but the train had to have a security measure for controlling the speed in a curve like that. So I think that the spanish government or the institution that have the responsibility of the train made the media say that, because the train's company does not want to care about that problem, so everyone says that the conductor is the only guilty, but it is not. The main problem are the victims of the accident, and we have to help them and their families instead of blaming one person or another.

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1 point 2 months ago (10)

In my opinion it's 100% the conductor's fault. If the conductor has full control over the speed of the train and knows what the speed limit is, it is entirely his responsibility to make sure the train is within that speed limit. Any sort of security measure in place should be protecting against mechanical failure, not operator incompetence.

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(<http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/worldnews-example.png>)

- My student's response to an article about a train tragedy in Spain. His assignment was to use five gerunds or infinitives. I have highlighted the target forms he incorporated into his text. Note that an unrelated Redditor responded to his comment.

Open-ended activity:

1. Individual students select from a list of teacher-approved subreddits to find a topic of personal interest. Here are some suggestions from among the most popular subreddits:

- /r/worldnews
- /r/science
- /r/todayilearned
- /r/space
- /r/politics
- /r/news
- /r/soccer
- /r/apple
- /r/technology

Teachers might also consider allowing:

- Subreddits related to the university, city, or region the ESL program is in
- Subreddits related to students' home countries or regions
- Subreddits related to students' academic fields

2. Individual students select articles to read. Consider having a minimum length requirement.
3. Each student types a response to their selected article, including any target vocabulary or grammar assigned by the teacher.



([http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TED-Logo-Ideas-Worth-Spreading-Global-Good-discussion-GlobalGoodGroup-](http://billprice.com/futureimperfect/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TED-Logo-Ideas-Worth-Spreading-Global-Good-discussion-GlobalGoodGroup-Reference.png)

Reference.png)

TED.com (<http://www.ted.com/>)

TED.com is a free website which contains hundreds of short lectures on innumerable topics. It is an excellent source of lecture-style listening texts to play in the classroom. However, it also has a commenting system similar to that of Reddit, enabling its use as a forum for authentic writing practice.

For intermediate and advanced students: watch lectures and write responses.

This activity can be conducted in either a controlled or very open-ended manner.

Strictly controlled activity:

1. The teacher finds a good, level-appropriate video. Consider pasting the video's transcript into the BNC-COCA-25 text profiler (<http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/bnc/>) to analyze its vocabulary content and help you develop supplemental materials for scaffolding and assessment.
2. Students watch the video in class as a normal in-class activity, including any necessary scaffolding, comprehension questions, discussion questions, and so on.
3. For homework, students visit the video on TED.com and type out their answer for one of the discussion questions. Students include any target vocabulary or grammar points assigned by the teacher.

Open-ended activity:

1. Students select a lecture to watch. Consider having a minimum and/or maximum time limit, such as videos between 5 and 20 minutes long.
2. Students watch the video in a lab class or for homework.
3. Students log into TED.com and type out a response to the video. Students include any target vocabulary or grammar points assigned by the teacher. Students might also be assigned to comment

on one or more other TED users' comments.

How have you used social news or media websites to help your students practice their writing skills and communicate with native speakers? Share your ideas in the comments!

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